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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 AMMAN 002165

SIPDIS

INFO ARAB ISRAELI COLLECTIVE PRIORITY

E.O. 12958: DECL: 03/21/2014

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SUBJECT: SHEIKH YASSIN'S KILLING COMPLICATES JORDAN-ISRAEL TIES

REF: AMMAN 1971

Classified By: DCM David Hale for reasons 1.5 (b and d)

SUMMARY

1. (C) A visibly upset FonMin Muasher told us March 22 that Israel's killing of HAMAS spiritual leader Sheikh Ahmad Yassin just days after King Abdullah's meeting with Prime Minister Sharon in Israel embarrassed the King, whose government has recently come under intense criticism for continued contact with Israel. The King met Sharon as members of Parliament rejected a no-confidence motion against three ministers who participated in the recent commemoration of a joint Israeli-Jordanian research center. Although there were few concrete results from the meeting with Sharon, it represented a step towards repairing tense relations between Israel and Jordan and might have set the stage for future exchanges, including a possible rescheduling of the visit to Jordan by Foreign Minister Silvan Shalom. However, Sheikh Yassin's assassination has personally embarrassed the King and shaken advocates of the relationship, who may now question Israel's commitment to its ties with Jordan and make it more difficult for the GOJ to explain why contact with Israel is in Jordan's interest. The killing also will embolden the anti-normalization movement in Jordan. End Summary.

FRESH FROM ISRAEL VISIT, KILLING EMBARRASSES KING

2. (C) Israel's assassination of HAMAS leader Sheikh Ahmad Yassin (who was released from Israeli jail in 1997 upon the late King Hussein's intercession) (fuller reaction septel) comes on the heels of King Abdullah's March 18 meeting with Prime Minister Sharon in Israel. A visibly upset Foreign Minister Muasher told the Ambassador March 22 that the assassination personally embarrassed the King and Jordan, and would affect how Jordan interacts with Israel in the future.

3. (C) Ashraf Zeitoon, officer in charge of Israel and peace process issues in FonMin Muasher's private office, told PolOff on March 21 that the three-hour meeting did not produce any breakthroughs, but was a prelude to future engagement on other bilateral issues, including a possible visit from Foreign Minister Shalom to Jordan in the near future. He said the visit was timed to precede the King's (and Sharon's) upcoming visit to Washington in April. The two leaders covered a wide range of bilateral issues, but mostly discussed Israel's plans to withdraw from Gaza. Sharon did not divulge the specifics of his plans, but King Abdullah shared the Jordanian position, insisting that the withdrawal must be within the context of the roadmap, not leave open a power vacuum for militants to fill, and not involve relocating settlers to the West Bank. (FonMin Muasher told the Ambassador that Sharon said the roadmap was "dead.")

4. (C) On other matters, Zeitoon reported that the Israelis tried to allay Jordanian concerns about the separation barrier. The King also asked for the release of remaining Jordanian prisoners in Israeli jails. However, the Jordanians received no concrete Israeli commitments on either score. Without divulging specifics, Zeitoon lamented that Israel is often willing to make promises to Jordanian officials privately but fails to follow up with public commitments that could help solidify the GOJ's position against rising anti-Israeli sentiment among Jordan's population.

GOJ ALREADY UNDER FIRE FOR ISRAELI-JORDANIAN PROJECT

5. (SBU) The King's visit to Israel occurred despite the brewing controversy over the newly commemorated Jordanian-Israeli Bridging the Rift research facility (ref). Though the King supported the project -- he hosted

a reception for the group upon its opening March 9 -- he hardly advertised the fact. Critics in Parliament led by Islamic Action Front MPs focused their wrath on his ministers in attendance at the commemoration, calling for a vote of no-confidence for Planning Minister Bassam Awadallah, Education Minister Khaled Toukan, and Minister of Higher Education Issam Zaabalawi. However, 78 of 82 MPs present on March 20 rejected the no-confidence motion. The vote came after 18 MPs walked out of the session to protest the Prime Minister's decision to hold the meeting behind closed doors, revealing the government's anxiety that this issue could get wider traction among the public.

16. (SBU) Speaker Abdul Hadi Majali sought to put a positive spin on the vote, saying before the meeting was adjourned that "the development is an indicator that democracy is a deep-rooted practice in Jordan." Later, four ministers held a press conference reiterating that the GOJ has the right to meet Israeli officials under the auspices of the Jordanian-Israeli peace treaty and that it is in Jordan's interest to do so. FonMin Muasher said such meetings are essential to defend Jordan's national interests, noting that recent prisoner releases would not have happened without direct contact with Israel.

17. (U) Asked whether the vote signals a worsening in relations between the GOJ and Parliament, Minister of Political Development and Parliamentary Affairs Mohammad Daoudiyeh said the vote "speaks for itself," adding: "We could call this a renewal of the confidence in the government if you like." Government spokesperson Asma Khader said the GOJ looks at the no confidence motion as "political opposition" and not an attack on the ministers themselves. "We have to remember here that the Jordan-Israeli peace treaty is an effective law passed by the Parliament. This is not the first time that ministers or officials meet Israeli officials and will not be the last." She added that such meetings do not indicate that the GOJ has no "sensitivities against the Israeli practices and do not mean that the government is content with what Israel is doing."

COMMENT

18. (C) Yassin's assassination could not have come at a worse time for the GOJ and King Abdullah, just fresh from a meeting with Sharon and just prior to the Arab League summit, as he looks complicit in the killing. While there is no love lost for HAMAS in the GOJ, most Jordanians view HAMAS as a legitimate Palestinian resistance organization and do not view Yassin as a terrorist; the killing could boost public support for the militant group. The killing challenges the credibility of GOJ officials who have publicly defended Jordanian-Israeli ties and will make it less likely that senior Jordanian officials will risk visible, high-level meetings with Israelis in the near term. FonMin Muasher said this move will effectively silence his and other moderates' efforts to ensure productive handling of the Israeli-Palestinian issue at the Arab League summit. The killing also will embolden the anti-normalization movement in Jordan, given emotional public reaction and the defensiveness of proponents of the Jordan-Israel relationship.

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